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ABSTRACT

To establish criteria for the selection of appropriate reading materials for adult beginning readers, a study was conducted to determine such readers' instructional level and ability to answer literal and higher level questions in three types of materials: narrative, familiar content, and unfamiliar content. Twenty-one adult learners reading at the first through fifth grade levels read narrative selections from each of the three types of materials then answered eight passage-dependent questions. Instructional level in each type of material was defined as the highest level at which the subject responded correctly to five out of eight questions. The results indicated that instructional levels in the three types of materials were significantly different: the instructional level for unfamiliar content materials was lower than the levels for narrative and familiar content materials. In all three types of materials, adult beginning readers scored significantly higher on literal level questions. The results indicated that the teachers who recommended the subjects had either over- or underestimated the general reading instructional level of almost half the students with most overestimating the level. The findings suggest that teachers of adult beginning readers need to be taught more accurate means of assessing reading instructional materials. (HTH)

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INFLUENCE OF BACKGROUND EXPERIENCE AND INTEREST ON INSTRUCTIONAL LEVEL OF ADULT BEGINNING READERS*

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INFLUENCE OF BACKGROUND EXPERIENCE AND INTEREST ON INSTRUCTIONAL LEVEL OF ADULT BEGINNING READERS

Choosing appropriate instructional-level materials for adult beginning readers can be difficult. Group-administered standardized achievement/survey tests for ABE learners are not designed to yield instructional levels. Most published informal reading inventories and reading diagnostic tests are designed for use with children. The content of these tests is inappropriate to the age and interests of the adult, which may affect the results. Finally, the adult beginning reader, unlike the child, brings to the task of learning to read many years of life experience and well-developed interests. Background knowledge greatly affects reading comprehension (Adams & Bruce, 1980). It may be that adult beginning readers' instructional levels will be different in different types of materials. We might expect that adult beginning readers would find materials of apparently equal difficulty easy to read when the content is familiar and/or of interest, and more difficult to read when the content is not familiar or of interest. The major purpose of this study was to determine adult beginning readers' instructional level and ability to answer literal and higher level questions in three types of materials: narrative, familiar content, and unfamiliar content.

Another problem facing those who choose instructional materials for adult beginning readers is that of content. Both professional literature (see Lempel, 1979) and current practice stress the importance

of presenting the adult learner with functional materials, those useful in daily life. That which is functional has been deliniated by the designers of Comptency Based Adult Education (CBAE) programs as materials dealing with: Consumer Economics, Occupational Knowledge, Health, Community Resources, and Government and Law. According to international research (Sullivan, 1976) adults the world over read for the following purposes:

1. To solve particular problems or maintain or improve their lives.
2. To help others.
3. To seek support and encouragement of their beliefs and practices.
4. To attain a particular economic level by gaining or improving job skills or learning to manage their resources.
5. To seek psychological escape.
6. To find pleasure and joy in the written word.
7. To expand and enlarge their environments and horizons.
8. To seek self-fulfillment or improvement.
9. To seek political participation.

The CBAE deliniation of what is functional - which relates to purposes 1, 4, 9, and possibly 7 and 8 above - may be too narrow. A second purpose of this study was to determine the subjects' preferences in instructional and practice materials, as well as their reading goals.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 21 adult learners enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) Courses at four rural or suburban instructional sites in Central Texas. Teachers were asked to recommend learners reading on beginning levels, the equivalent of first through fifth-grade levels. Of the 40 recommended, 13 were found to be reading below first-grade level in all types of materials, and 6 were found to be reading above fifth-grade level in all types of materials. The remaining 21 were used as subjects.

The subjects' ages ranged from 17 to 63, with 50% being from 26 to 40 years old. Twenty-five percent were Anglo-American; 40% were Mexican-American; 5% were black; and 30% were foreign born. Forty-five percent reported English as their primary language, 35% reported Spanish, and 30% reported other languages. Sixty-five percent were female. One subject was retired; two were unemployed and seeking work; 5 were homemakers; the rest were employed in various blue-collar and service jobs.

Materials

Narrative selections from various adult instructional materials and functional selections from CBAE materials on Consumer Economics, Health, and Occupational Knowledge were adapted to create an informal reading inventory. Originally plans were made to use materials from the other two CBAE strands, Community Resources and Government and Law, but the researcher could not find such materials written at the very lowest reading levels. Passages of equivalent difficulty, based on the Fry (1977) graph, were created for each level from one to five. The passages were also matched in length. Eight passage-dependent questions (Rupley & Blair, 1979) were created for each passage. Half of the questions for each

passage were literal-level and half were higher-level. Passage-dependency was checked by having an undergraduate class attempt to answer the questions without reading the passages. Any questions that could be answered without reading the passaged were replaced. The levels of the questions were confirmed by peers in the university reading center. A 33 item questionnaire designed to yield information about each subjects' background, materials preferences, and reading goals was created.

Procedures

Subjects were tested individually during evening classtime in an empty room at each instructional site. Each subject was told the purposes of the study, which had been explained previously by the teachers, and asked if s/he wished to participate. Questions from the questionnaire were asked and answers recorded. Subjects were told the types of functional passages (Consumer Economics, etc.) and given a brief explanation of the type of information each would contain. Subjects were then asked which topic they knew the most about and in which they had the most interest (positive content), and which topic they knew the least about or in which they had the least interest (negative content). They then read silently and answered orally examiner-posed questions about narrative passages, positive content passages, and negative content passages. The order in which subjects were asked to read the various types of passages was counterbalanced to control for order effects. Responses to questions were recorded. Each individual session lasted about an hour. A brief break was taken after 30 minutes.

RESULTS

Instructional Levels

Instructional level in each type of material was defined as the highest level at which the subject responded correctly to 5 out of the 8 questions. Repeated measures analysis of variance was used to analyze this data. The results of this analysis, summarized in Table 1, indicated that instructional levels in the three types of materials were significantly different.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Inspection of Table 2, which presents means and standard deviations, reveals that the instructional level for negative content materials was lower than instructional level in narrative and positive content materials.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Each subject's percentage of literal questions and higher level questions answered correctly in each type of material was determined. Correlated t-tests were used to analyze this data. The results, summarized in Table 3, indicate that in all three types of materials, adult beginning readers scored significantly higher percentages correct on literal level questions.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Responses to questionnaire items were recorded and percentages determined. Responses to questions related to background were reported in the Subjects

section of this paper. Subjects' preferences for types of instructional/ practice materials, and types of materials they wanted to learn to read better are summarized in Table 4. Thirty percent of the subjects listed

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INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

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a variety of materials, including narrative, when asked what kind of materials they would like to read in class for instruction and practice. Fifty percent of the subjects listed a variety of materials, including narrative, when asked what kind of materials they would like to be able to read better. Twenty percent of the subjects listed only preference for CBAE-type materials (work-related, home-family, subjects-related) for instructional/practice materials. Twenty-five percent expressed a goal of reading better only CBAE-type materials.

As indicated in Table 5, 50% of the subjects - who were functioning at reading levels equivalent to elementary grades 1 to 5 - expected to reach their reading goals after a year or less of instruction.

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

DISCUSSION

Teachers who participated in this study over or underestimated the general reading instructional level of most half of the learners they recommended for participation in the study. Most teacher errors involved overestimating general reading instructional levels. These teachers of adult beginning readers need to be taught more accurate means of assessing reading instructional levels if they are to be able to select materials of appropriate difficulty for the learners they teach.

TABLE 1

SUMMARY TABLE OF REPEATED MEASURES ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE BETWEEN INSTRUCTIONAL LEVELS IN THREE TYPES OF MATERIALS FOR ADULT BEGINNING READERS

SOURCE OF VARIATION	SS	DF	MS	F
BETWEEN PEOPLE	105.75	20	5.29	
WITHIN PEOPLE	76.67	40	1.83	
BETWEEN MEASURES	11.46	2	5.73	3.52*
RESIDUAL	65.21	40	1.63	
TOTAL	18.42	62		

*$P < .05$

TABLE 2

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL LEVEL IN THREE TYPES OF MATERIALS FOR ADULT BEGINNING READERS

TYPE OF MATERIALS		
NARRATIVE	2.57	1.78
POSITIVE CONTENT	2.57	1.69
NEGATIVE CONTENT	1.66	1.59

TABLE 3

CORRELATED T-TESTS FOR LITERAL AND HIGHER LEVEL QUESTIONS

IN THREE TYPES OF MATERIALS FOR ADULT BEGINNING READERS

TYPE OF MATERIAL	LITERAL		HIGHER			
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	N	T
NARRATIVE	79.48	20.82	61.90	20.34	21	2.87**
POSITIVE CONTENT	79.14	16.45	61.29	12.44	21	3.47**
NEGATIVE CONTENT	70.81	24.16	52.38	20.77	21	2.72*

*P .05
**P .01

TABLE 4

PERCENTAGES FOR TYPE OF MATERIAL SUBJECTS PREFERRED FOR CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION/PRACTICE AND WANTED TO READ BETTER

	PREFERENCES	GOALS
TYPE OF MATERIALS	INSTRUCTION/PRACTICE	WANTS TO READ BETTER
NARRATIVE	20%	10%
WORK-RELATED	5%	5%
FAMILY/HOME RELATED	0%	10%
SUBJECT RELATED (E.G. History, Math)	15%	10%
RELIGIOUS	5%	5%
NEWSPAPERS/MAGAZINES	25%	10%
VARIOUS TYPES OF MATERIALS	30%	50%
TOTALS	100%	100%

TABLE 5

TIME SUBJECTS THOUGHT IT WOULD TAKE

TO REACH READING GOALS IN PERCENTS

TIME	PERCENTS
LESS THAN 1 YEAR	25%
1 YEAR	25%
1-2 YEARS	15%
2+ YEARS	20%
DON'T KNOW	15%
TOTAL	100%

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